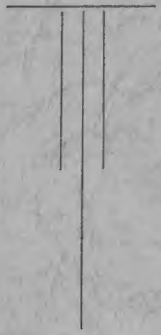
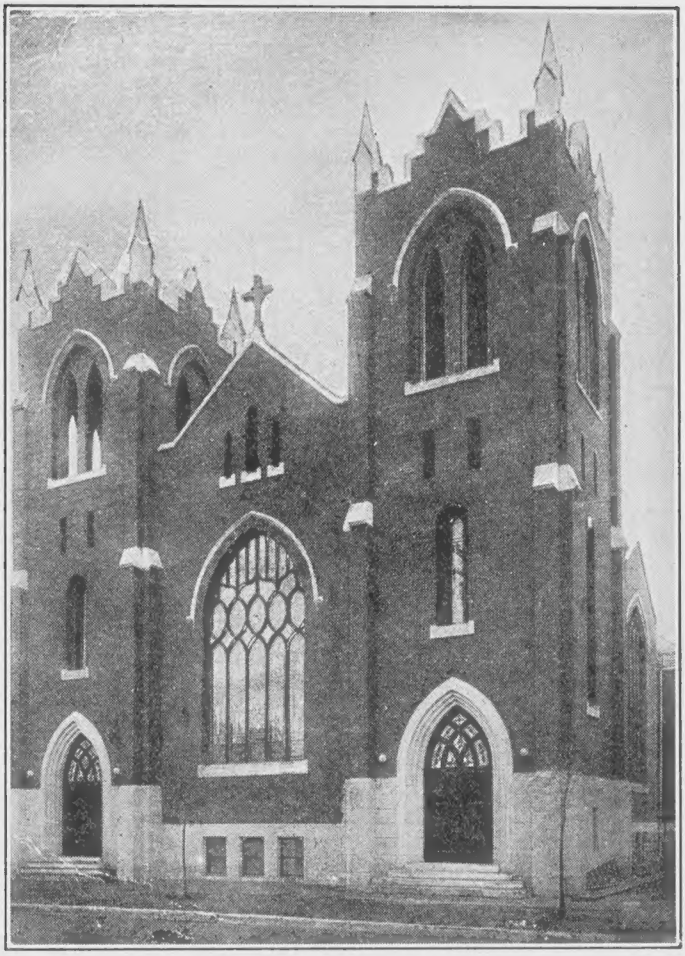
SIXTY YEARS OF SERVICE



Address delivered
November 2nd, 1938
by Dr. B. J. Brandson
President of the
First Lutheran Church
Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA.



DR. B. J. BRANDSON

PRESIDENT FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA.

Faith of the Founders

THE founding of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg sixty years ago is doubtless one of the most important events in the history of the Icelandic people in America. The very small band who were the original founders were poverty stricken strangers in a strange land that they had not yet learned to call "home". They had no experience with a free church, the church of Iceland being a state church, for whose conducting and management the people have no responsibility. But even if they brought with them no knowledge or experience in church management from their homeland, they brought something that was more valuable and that was a very strong faith in a divine Providence. Without a sustaining faith, and implicit trust in the guidance of God, it is doubtful if many of them would have left Iceland to seek their fortunes in America. At the time of the first migration from Iceland to America, America was an unknown land of mystery and even terrors to many who finally decided to make the plunge and leave Iceland, in most cases never to see it again. The same faith that had sustained their fathers through the many tribulations of a 1000 years of Icelandic history gave them courage to face the unknown terrors and privations of a distant land.

The first few years of Icelandic pioneer life in America were in most cases of such hardship as to tax the stoutest hearts. The lot of the men who tamed the American or Canadian wilderness was always a hard lot. The Icelanders found their task especially difficult because they knew neither the language nor the manner of life of their new home. The first decade of Icelandic settlement in America saw doubtless the darkest days of their pioneer life. Even the most courageous often nearly lost hope, but never entirely. As on the cold winter night the stars often shine the brightest, so in human life the twin stars of faith and hope shed their brightest light when in the night of despair we need that light the most.

Faith and hope was really the entire capital that the founders of this church had to build with. But if faith can move mountains, it can also build churches. The founders felt that preservation of the faith of their fathers was essential for their own existence in this new home. From that faith came the endurance in trial, fortitude in sorrow, and courage in the dangers of pioneer life. It can be safely said that at no time in the history of Icelandic peoples anywhere has faith been a more living, moving force than among the Icelanders

in this country in the early days. Sustained by that faith and a hope that never died, their undertakings in various fields prospered in spite of all manner of difficulties.

Progress was necessarily slow during the first few years not only because the founders were few in number and all very poor, but they lacked a real leader. Six years after its foundation Dr. Jón Bjarnason took charge of the church, and remained its pastor for 30 years. So much has been written and spoken about that great man that it would be quite superfluous to try to add anything thereto on this occasion beyond a passing reference. Dr. Bjarnason's name has become a venerated tradition in this church and that with good reason. He really laid the foundation upon which we are still building, and we are all thankful that his work was so well done.

It is now nearly a quarter of a century since the revered leader was called home. Many of our younger members either never saw him or they were too young at the time of his death to remember very much about him. To them I would say that what made him a great man and a great leader was his living faith, a faith that never wavered amidst the greatest difficulties. His nobility of character, sincerity, and steadfastness of purpose was apparent to all. He was gifted to a high degree with a personal magnetism that bound to him in bonds of firm, lifelong friendship a host of his contemporaries.

In my early school days I enjoyed the study of American history more than most other subjects, and the part that I liked to dwell on more than any other was the story of the early settlements in America, their struggles, trials and development. This subject doubtless struck a sympathetic cord because my own people had also suffered the hardships of American pioneer life and my early years were spent under pioneer conditions. The band of pioneers in America that made the greatest impression on my youthful mind was the so-called Puritans or Pilgrim Fathers of New England. I admired them above all others, not so much for their great contribution to American national life but for their sterling character. In later life I have often tried to find a resemblance between the rugged, God fearing Puritan of Massachusetts and the Icelandic settlers of Western Canada, and I came to the conclusion that many of their noblest traits of character they had in common. When I hear Rev. Bjarnason accused of being narrow-minded and bigoted I recollect that the same charge was made against the Puritan settlers in America. But any tree should be judged not by its roots but by its fruit. Upon the foundation laid by the Pilgrim Fathers has been built a great nation, where the ideals of a free state and a free church have reached their highest development. Upon the foundation that Dr. Bjarnason laid rests the Ice-

landic Lutheran Synod, the most liberal of the many Lutheran synods in America.

This church was fortunate in enjoying the leadership of a man like Dr. Bjarnason during its formative, pioneer period. When he died in 1914 many were very apprehensive of the future. A few months after his death the Great War started, and for more than four years it had a paralyzing effect on all church activities. But it very soon became apparent that in Dr. Jónsson the church had found a worthy successor to the deeply mourned leader. During his 24 years of service he displayed great qualities for leadership, unusual organizing abilities and great breadth of vision. Dr. Jónsson was one of those fortunate men who grew in intellectual stature and whose mental horizon widened with the advancing years. His creed became simpler as he learned to differentiate between essentials and non essentials. His whole creed might be summarized as faith in the living Christ. That faith alone he considered as the secure foundation upon which all Christians could safely build. This faith to him was fundamental, and nothing else really mattered. He fully realized that in an ever changing world there are certain fundamentals that can never change. Non essentials can be compromised or even abandoned but you cannot long compromise a point of conscience. Moral principles are absolute and eternal. You may stretch an inch of rubber to cover your hat, but you cannot stretch a diamond the shadow of a hair. The living Christ, the fundamental principle of Christian faith, was an ever fresh subject for many of his most beautiful sermons, sermons that showed him a pulpit orator with few equals.

Changing conditions in any organization constantly bring into being new problems that demand solution. Sometimes these problems are of such magnitude that upon their happy solution depends the very existence of the organization concerned. Of all the problems that this congregation had to solve in the last generation the language question was perhaps the most difficult. Our church was here faced by the same question that all other Scandinavian churches in this country had been called upon to solve for themselves. Because many of them were older than we their experience could show us the right road to follow. Sooner or later every foreign language church is faced with the fact that taking up the use of the English language to a greater or less extent in the church is an absolutely necessary step for safeguarding the very existence of the church. The change of language becomes an acute question sooner in the cities than in the country, where the old mother tongue is usually preserved for a longer time. The Icelanders, in common with their Scandinavian brethren, adopt the language of the land sooner than

many other nationalities. The adoption of the language of the land is only a part of their early assimilation by the more numerous people among whom they have made their home. The Norsemen for more than a 1000 years have been a migrating people, finding new homes in various countries of the world. Wherever they went they lost their language in a comparatively short time, but that did not prevent them from very often making valuable contributions to the character and culture of the nation where they had settled. The Norsemen who conquered Normandy soon lost their language, but their national characteristics remained. Later on, when William of Normandy conquered England, he did not bring with him the Norse language, but the French, which in its turn gave way to the Anglo-Saxon, the largest element in the English language of today. How much better it would have been for our war scarred world of today if for the last 500 years other minorities had displayed the same ease of assimilation and co-operation as the Scandinavians have always shown. Then there would not have been any problem of Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia or other problems of national minorities threatening to plunge the whole world into suicidal wars.

Next to their faith the native tongue has been the Icelanders' greatest treasure. It was the language that through all the dark ages of Iceland's history kept the fires burning and preserved the national consciousness. The older I get the more I admire the Icelandic language, the better do I realize what a loss it is to our people to lose such a cultural jewel. But the loss of the Icelandic language as a language of daily use in this country is inevitable, much as we may regret it. That is a part of the price that national minorities in America must inevitably pay for the hospitality and privileges extended to them in the land of their adoption. I think that most of you will agree with me that the question of language has been happily solved in this congregation and for that happy solution we owe Dr. Jónsson a great debt of gratitude. At the time the change was being made Dr. Jónsson came in for much undeserved criticism and even abuse. His vision was wide enough to see the future as well as the past, while his critics had their eyes glued to the past alone and refused to look forward. When I see men getting out of step with their times because they refuse to heed changing conditions, they remind me of the story of Lot's wife. Instead of looking forward, she looked back, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Unfortunately in every community we have men who worship the past at the expense of the future and refuse to see any need at any time for any change, and consequently they became spiritually transformed into pillars, if not of salt, then of rapidly decaying wood.

Because the Icelandic language was so dear to our people it meant a great sacrifice on their part to change over to even a part use of the English in our church. Then as so often before and since, the true spirit of Christian co-operation and goodwill was evident in our midst. Our older people reconciled themselves to what they had deemed a loss, because they became convinced that it was for the greatest good for the greatest number. That they did so as graciously as they did was a great credit to them and the example of conciliation and goodwill exemplified in their conduct will never be forgotten. Any further extension in regard to the use of the English language in the church should not be looked for for a long time to come. I feel certain that so long as there is a demand for an Icelandic service, the evening service will continue to be conducted as it is now. That the morning service is rapidly becoming the chief service in the church, is quite in harmony with what we find in many of the leading churches not only in this city but elsewhere. As a last word tonight on the subject of language, I want to say that if the change had not been made when it was, we would probably not be here tonight. The First Lutheran Church if not a spiritual failure would have been a financial bankrupt, and its doors closed some years ago.

After paying a slight tribute to our two honored leaders it would be a serious oversight not to mention the wives of these two men. Many a public man's career is made or marred by his wife, and nowhere is this more true than when we consider clergymen and their wives. Fortunately the two women here concerned were so richly endowed with qualities of heart and mind as to make them the ideal helpmates of their husbands. I think I may be pardoned for saying that Mrs. Bjarnason both in her life time and since her death received the recognition and the honor she deserved. She has long been an honored tradition in this church. I am confident that it will not be long before Mrs. Jónsson is placed on the same pedestal of honor as her predecessor, because in honoring her the congregation pays honor to a career of life-long devotion, loyalty and unselfish service.

I am sure that I speak for you all when I say that we have confidence that Mrs. Eylands will fill that seat of honor well which she now occupies. Hers is by no means an easy position for even in our democratic church it can be said that "uneasy rests the head that wears the crown". Her reputation for ability, tact and grace of manner preceded her here, and her short stay has already confirmed all favorable advance reports. While we all bid her heartily welcome and wish her happiness and success, I am sure that to the women of the church she is especially welcome. To the two ladies aids I

would most respectfully suggest that they do not burden her with the cares of any office except perhaps that of honorary president, while they avail themselves to the fullest extent of her good counsel and abilities in other ways. Some of you may think she is too young to be an active member of the senior ladies aid, but I am sure she does not think so, but on the other hand welcomes the opportunity of growing graciously old in the genial atmosphere of that splendid organization.

No leader can be successful without the loyalty and devotion of his followers. From its very beginning the First Lutheran Church has enjoyed the self-sacrificing devotion of a large company of unselfish men and women. Without their faithful work and constant effort the church could not have prospered. Think for a moment of the hundreds of faithful members that at sometime in the last sixty years have taught in the Sunday School, sang in the choir, worked in one of the ladies aids, held office as deacons, trustees or in the young peoples societies, Men's Club and other organizations, and last but not least think of him or her whom Dr. Jónsson once called the unknown soldiers of the church, who without coming out in the open, support the church in faithfulness and self-sacrifice because they love it and its work.

The sixty years of our history may be roughly divided into two nearly equal periods, corresponding to the tenure of office of our two pastors. Each of these periods is approximately one generation. The third generation is now about to take charge, led by a new leader. I think that in the history of the Icelandic church in America there has never been a man called to the office of pastor in a large congregation with so nearly a unanimous vote as Mr. Eylands received on the very first ballot. This showed such confidence and trust as few men are fortunate enough to have shown them. I am sure that to him this is not a cause for vanity or glorification but rather a powerful incentive to be deserving of that trust and display of confidence. Mr. Eylands enters upon his ministry enjoying the goodwill and full measure of confidence of the congregation, but he had also won the approbation of his predecessor. It was to Mr. Eylands' care that Dr. Jónsson committed that sword of the spirit that he had so bravely wielded for many years, trusting that in him he had found a worthy successor. I feel that there is every reason to hope that Mr. Eylands will be for our third generation what Dr. Bjarnason and Dr. Jónsson were for our first and second. These three men were profoundly unlike except for their living faith and devotion. For our first generation Dr. Bjarnason undoubtedly was a more successful leader than either of the other men would have been, but for the second generation Dr. Jónsson was more successful than a man like Dr. Bjarnason would have been. The third generation needs a different

type of man from the other two, and most of us feel that in Mr. Eylands there is such a man, and we all bid him welcome, assuring him of our undivided loyalty and goodwill.

At this time I would like to ask a question which many of you have doubtless asked yourselves; why a Jubilee in a church or any other organization? Is it to be an occasion for entertainments and getting together to boast of past achievments and glorify the days of old? If that is all there is to a Jubilee celebration it is not worth while. Dr. Jónsson maintained that a real Jubilee celebration should be one where new life and energy would be infused into every phase of the activities for which the organization stands. With this idea I heartily agree. In reviewing the past we are seeking an inspiration for the future. Dr. Jónsson had looked forward to this Jubilee as the crowning event of his career. In his enthusiasm he pictured every organization within the church as inspired and enthused by the Jubilee spirit, and he hoped that such inspiration would carry his beloved church to heights hitherto unattained. I fear that we have miserably failed in reaching the goal Dr. Jónsson would have had us strive for, possibly with one or two exceptions. He would have been greatly pleased with the work of the deacons and the pastor whose energetic efforts have added a large number to our membership roll. The efforts made to lift the burden of debt which the church has carried for many years and handicapped our activities he would also have considered a worthwhile Jubilee celebration. In the splendid concert given by the choirs and the magnificent audience here this evening he would also have found an inspiration. That inspiration would have been great in proportion to the determination of the audience to carry on with the work here well begun, to make this church an ever-growing force for good in the community.

I said a moment ago that the third generation of men and women with a new leader was now taking charge of this church. We who are about to leave the stage salute you and bid you God speed. I hope you will not think it out of place here to remind you of the immortal words of Dr. McCrae,

> "To you from failing hands we throw
> The torch, be it yours to hold high;
> If ye break faith with us who die,
> We shall not sleep."

Be faithful to those who have gone before. Honor the memory of the founders of this church by being loyal to the faith that made them strong in the midst of their trials and make it your constant prayer that the faith of the fathers may always be the sustaining force of your own lives.

This booklet is issued by the Diamond Jubilee Committee on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of the First Lutheran Church.

1878 — LEGEND — 1938

Congregation organized August 11, 1878.

Built Church, McWilliam Ave. and Nina St., 1887.
Built Church, Sherbrook St. and Bannatyne Ave., 1904.
Moved into present Church, Victor St. at Sargent Ave., 1921.

1st Minister, Rev. Jón Bjarnason, D.D., called 1884, Died 1914.
2nd Minister, Rev. B. B. Jónsson, D.D., called 1914, Died 1938.
Present Minister, Rev. Valdimar J. Eylands, called 1938.

First officers of the Church, elected August 11, 1878.

Trustees: Jón Thorðarson, Arngrímur Jónsson, Andrea Fischer.

Deacons: A. Jónsson, Helga S. Thorsteinsdóttir, Jóhanna Kr. Skaptadóttir.

Sunday School Teachers: Andrea Fischer, Helga S. Thorsteinsdóttir, Jóhanna Kr. Skaptadóttir.

1938 OFFICERS

Trustees

Dr. B. J. Brandson, President
J. G. Johannsson, Vice-Pres.
Albert Wathne, Secretary
Fred Thordarson, Treasurer
John J. Vopni
G. F. Jonasson
S. W. Melsted
Th. Stone
O. G. Bjornson
Jim Snidal

Deacons

J. J. Swanson, Chairman
Miss Thea Hermann, Secretary
S. O. Bjerring, Treasurer
Mrs. Bertha Nicholson
J. B. Johnson
Mrs. K. J. Backman
B. Baldwin
Miss G. Bildfell
Richard L. Vopni
Miss V. Jonasson

Ladies Aid

Mrs. J. Julius, Hon. President
Mrs. H. Olson, Hon. President
Mrs. O. Stephensen, President
Mrs. Finnur Johnson, Secretary
Mrs. M. Paulson, Treasurer

Junior Ladies Aid

Mrs. B. B. Jonsson, Hon. Pres.
Mrs. G. F. Jonasson, President
Mrs. B. Guttormson, Secretary
Mrs. W. R. Pottruff, Treasurer

Sunday School

T. E. Thorsteinson, Manager
J. B. Johnson, Superintendent
Miss Elva Eyford, Secretary
Herb. G. Henrickson, Treasurer

Men's Club

E. S. Feldsted, President
Dr. A. V. Johnson, Sec.-Treas.

Missionery Society

Mrs. R. Marteinsson, President
Mrs. O. Stephenson, Vice-Pres.
Mrs. H. Olson, Secretary
Mrs. E. S. Feldsted, Treasurer

Young Peoples Society

Miss Norma Benson, President
Miss Grace Johnston, Secretary
Paul Finnbogason, Treasurer

S. Sigurdson, Choirmaster
Miss Snjolaug Sigurdson, Organist
Einar Haralds, Sexton